

Book review the immortal life of henrietta lack essay



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In 1951 an African American woman was diagnosed with cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital, since it was one of the only hospitals that would treat black patients. During one of her exams, cells were taken from her cervix without her consent or knowledge. Little did she or her family know that these cells would go on to help make the polio vaccine, help to develop cloning, and gene mapping to name a few. These cells advanced medicine tremendously, but no one knew where they came from; only that they were called HeLa cells for her first and last name.

Her family was also never told the significance Henrietta's cells had, and received nothing from them. They couldn't even afford healthcare themselves. Rebecca Skloot wants Henrietta's story to be told, and the injustice to her family by not receiving any kind of compensation or benefit from all that the HeLa cells provided to medicine - especially since she had no knowledge or consent in the matter. She also portrays the strides made in medicine by using the HeLa cells, and just how important they were.

One of the first major unethical events happened in chapter 3 when Henrietta went in for her first treatment. " But first - though no one had told Henrietta that TeLinde was collecting samples or asked if she wanted to be a donor - Wharton picked up a sharp knife and shaved two dime-sized pieces of tissue from Henrietta's cervix: one from her tumor, and one from the healthy cervical tissue nearby" (Skloot 33). Although Henrietta had signed the consent form to perform any operative procedure, it states nowhere she consented to being a donor of her cells.

Consequently, after Gey saw that these cells did not die in his laboratory, he began giving them to his colleagues. Chapter 8 is also a prime example of how black were unethically treated. Although Henrietta complained of further pain, the doctor ignored her and said he found nothing wrong. “ This was a time when ‘ benevolent deception’ was a common practice – doctors often withheld even the most fundamental information from their patients, sometimes not giving them any diagnosis at all” (Skloot 63). One of the biggest contributions of the HeLa cells were to creating the polio vaccine.

By the end of 1951 there was a polio epidemic going on, and one man, Jonas Salk, claimed to have the first ever vaccine, but he needed to test in on a wide scale – this is where Henrietta’s cells came into play; “ With those cells, scientists helped prove the Salk vaccine effective” (Skloot 96). This is also around the time the cells started to be shipped, but this time, at a price. Millions of HeLa cells were sold across the country, but the Lacks’ family were never told nor did they receive any compensation, much less health care. ...and they were susceptible to infections, which made them an optimal tool for synthesizing and studying any number of things in culture, including bacteria, hormones, proteins, and especially viruses” (Skloot 97). Thus, HeLa cells were thriving unknowingly by the family. Chapter 17 depicts yet another unethical act – injecting humans who already had cancer with HeLa cells to see if they would develop tumors. Chester Southam was the mastermind behind this operation. He continued to then inject healthy humans as well as prisoners. “ If he explained anything, he simply said he was testing them for cancer” (Skloot 130).

The research ended when three Jewish doctors, all familiar with the Nuremberg Trials, refused to keep doing trials on patients without their consent. The doctors went on to publicize this news. “ As a result of the investigation, the NIG said that to qualify for funding, all proposals for research on human subjects had to be approved by review boards - independent bodies made up of professionals and laypeople of diverse races, classes, and backgrounds - to ensure that they met the NIH’s requirements, including detailed informed consent” (Skloot 135).

It is apparent that throughout the book the remaining family of Henrietta is struggling. Whether it is drugs, abuse, poor health status, or poverty. None of her family really knew what her cells were doing in the world, either. “ I know they did something important, but nobody tells us nothing” (Skloot 162). That quotation sums up most of her family’s knowledge concerning her cells. The family had been told many lies, like the cells were just given away, and also that Henrietta had donated her cells. This made it hard for them to trust anyone asking questions about Henrietta. In 1969, a Hopkins researcher used blood samples from more than 7, 000 neighborhood children - most of them from poor black families - to look for a genetic predisposition to criminal behavior” (Skloot 167). This does not give Hopkins a good name as an institution, as sure does not lead the Lacks’ family to believe Henrietta really got the care she deserved. Lead experiments were also done on children by Hopkins. The first time Henrietta’s real name was exposed was after George Gey’s death from pancreatic cancer in 1970.

A few of his colleagues from Hopkins decided to write an article about the history of the HeLa cell line as tribute to Gey’s career. They also discovered <https://assignbuster.com/book-review-the-immortal-life-of-henrietta-lack-essay/>

that Henrietta had been misdiagnosed in her form of cancer. In chapter 23, investigators want to collect blood samples from the remainder of Henrietta's family. However, they barely understand anything they are told. They believe that they are being tested to see if they have cancer like Henrietta had, but that isn't the case. ...I suspect there was no effort to explain anything in great detail" (Skloot 183). In March of 1976, an article in the Rolling Stones was published. This is the first time Henrietta's story had been told, and the public was informed that she was in fact black. Much like Henrietta, in chapter 25, John Moore was robbed of his cells. Like many blacks, he was afraid to confront the doctor or ask questions. " You think maybe this guy will cut you off, and you're going to die or something" (Skloot 200).

This is referring to refusing to give consent. Moore even asked if what the doctor was doing was making him any money, and the doctor replied " no". " That's when Moore sent the form to a lawyer, who found that Golde had devoted much of the seven years since Moore's surgery to developing and marketing a cell line called Mo" (Skloot 201). Even years later, doctors were still deceiving patients. However, it made positive strides in the direction of AIDS, HIV, and HEPB. Chapter 26 hits on the point of breaching privacy.

Deborah obtained a copy of a book called A Conspiracy of Cells: One Woman's Immortal Legacy and the Medical Scandal It Caused. There was a very graphic passage that had Henrietta's medical information and records. This tore Deborah apart. Yet another example of no confidentiality, respect, or ethics. The BBC eventually made a documentary about Henrietta. On

October 11, 1996, Roland Pattillo organized the first annual HeLa Cancer
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Control Symposium at Morehouse School of Medicine. He also petitioned the city of Atlanta to deem October 11 Henrietta Lacks Day. When she heard about his plans for the conference and official naming of Henrietta Lacks Day, she was ecstatic: finally, a scientist was honoring her mother” (Skloot 219). Throughout many chapters, Rebecca builds her relationship with Deborah trying to gain her trust. Rebecca assures her that if the book she is writing ever gets published, she will set up a scholarship fund for decedents of Henrietta. Deborah also learns how to use a computer, and becomes slightly obsessed with learning things about her mother.

In chapter 32, Deborah, Zakariyya, and Rebecca went to Hopkins so they could see Henrietta’s cells. “ She stood mesmerized, watching one of her mother’s cells divide in two, just as they’d done when Henrietta was an embryo in her mother’s womb” (Skloot 265). Throughout the remaining chapters, Deborah continues to learn about her mother, as does Rebecca. It finally seems as if Deborah is at peace with it all - “ But maybe I’ll come back as some HeLa cells like my mother, that way we can do good together out there in the world” (Skloot 310).